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Values Reconciliation: Constructing the Exemplary Ideal Personhood through Overseas Education

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Abstract

This article examines the values that Chinese middle-class families desire for their offspring to acquire, through an analysis of the families' motivations for pursuing overseas higher education. Based on fieldwork with Chinese tertiary students in the United Kingdom, this article analyses the values – described in interviews by students and their parents and grandparents – that drive these families' overseas higher education strategies. The results show that in contrast to the current (dominant instrumentalist) understandings of international student motivations, some Chinese middle-class families' belief in higher education is about the development of a socialist ideal personhood and the wish to make significant social contributions. Ultimately, the author argues that some Chinese middle-class families are experiencing a transition, from egoism to altruism, and in future, fulfilling Confucian values and making social contributions is highly likely to become part of middle-class subjectivities.

Keywords

Ideal *suzhi*, ideal personhood, overseas education, Chinese middle-class families, making contributions, Confucian values

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Introduction

In recent years, the number of Chinese students from middle- and high-income regions of urban China opting to study abroad has skyrocketed. According to the ICEF Monitor (2015),

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> The latest data from China's Ministry of Education indicates that 459,800 Chinese students went abroad in 2014, an 11.1 per cent increase from the previous year. Of those who studied abroad, 21,300 were sponsored by public funding sources, 15,500 were employer-funded, and 423,000 or 92 per cent were self-funded.

This trend supports the increasing demand, globally, for higher education experiences and qualifications (Sidhu, 2002). Particularly, the associated increase in the numbers of students studying overseas is linked to wider changes in the global political economy of China and expanding educational choices in both Chinese and overseas higher education.

This article examines the values that Chinese middle-class families want to cultivate in their children through an analysis of their motivations for pursuing overseas higher education that employs an intergenerational approach. It also draws inspiration from Dumont's definition (1977, 1980) of value as a paramount value that generates a socially internalised hierarchy of values capable of structuring themselves into a spectrum of systematic beliefs, practices, and relations based on their contribution to the fulfilment of this paramount value. The Chinese middle-class families' motivations for pursuing overseas education in this article is to fulfil their paramount value – Confucian values. These families' older generations desire to cultivate the younger generation and for them to fulfil the Confucian concept of *junzi* (君子, an exemplary person) to not only serve larger social goals that are embedded in their country's history but also echo the socialist-collectivist ideology that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to inculcate in Chinese citizens. This is markedly different from the dominant instrumentalist understandings of international student motivations such as enhancing employment prospects, increasing chances of future success, reproducing advantages, and migration to a different country (see Fong, 2011; Griner and Sobol, 2014; Li, 2010; Waters, 2005; Yang, 2007). As such, the theoretical lens that I apply in my study of the middle-class families' motivations for pursuing overseas higher education incorporates Dumont's argument (1977, 1980) that value is a means by which we can comprehend how subjects internalise the hierarchical order of values and perceive their significance by measuring these practices against their capability to uphold the paramount value. Through my highlighting of values, my aim is to make an original contribution to the existing literature on (a) the kind of values and ideal personhood that these families desire for their children to embody, (b) how these values influence their practices, and (c) how overseas education helps to fulfil their paramount value.

To understand the values held ideal by Chinese middle-class families, reference to the value systems of wider Chinese society provides a useful background to situate my analysis. Bakken called Chinese society an "exemplary" one, given that it is "a society where 'human quality' based on the exemplary norm and its exemplary behavior is regarded as a force for realizing a modern society of perfect order" (Bakken, 2000: 9). The "exemplary norm" here refers to "the average, median, or typical pattern of 'normal' behavior" (Bakken, 2000: 9). Bakken also explained that discipline and education are the defining features of this exemplary Chinese society, in which current societal norms and values – that serve as a form of moral restraint – have been accepted by the masses.

This study directs the reader's attention to Chinese society's exemplary norms and values to explain my interviewees' range of different expectations and motivations for pursuing higher education overseas. This study finds that both the students and their families' motivations for pursuing overseas education stem from the importance to these families of personal cultivation (修身, *xiushen*) and making contributions to society (贡献, *gongxian*); these values on one hand reflect traditional Chinese philosophies of pedagogy and, on the other, echo a key socialist-collectivist concern. After explaining my research methodology, this article proceeds to first discuss the classical works of some of the most renowned Chinese philosophers and educators; in this work, the interlocutors address some of the exemplary values associated with Confucian-inspired pedagogy. As such, this selection of work illustrates Chinese "exemplary norms" and traditional values that have guided people's way of life throughout Chinese history. Following this section, I present an overview of a series of reforms in China, with particular emphasis on how traditional Confucian values continue to influence people's conduct and ethics; this section serves as the backdrop for the next section, in which I analyse how Chinese middle-class families perceive and understand exemplary values in the contemporary context and how they strive to cultivate their offspring through overseas education.

Research Methodology

This research focuses on the life and educational experiences – domestic and/or overseas – of contemporary Chinese middle-class families across three generations: students (all aged between twenty-five and twenty-nine in my study), parents, and grandparents. The research for this article is based on more than 100 in-depth separate interviews with twenty-two students (seventeen females and five males), thirty-two parents (fifteen fathers and seventeen mothers), and eighteen grandparents (ten grandfathers and eight grandmothers) conducted over a period of twelve months between 2016 and 2017. All student interviewees (except one doctoral student) were self-sponsored Chinese students enrolled at a top University in the United Kingdom and major in various subjects including, education, medicine, engineering, anthropology, and sociology, as of 2016. The students were recruited through a snowballing method, starting with the author's personal network that developed into a broader sample from the point at which the original informants volunteered to put this author in touch with their relatives.

The students, born between 1989 and 1993, are from various cities in China with the majority coming from Zhengjiang, Guangzhou, Henan, and Fujian provinces. Of the twenty-two students, seventeen are studying at the master's level, two at the undergraduate level, and three at the doctorate level. Parents, born in the years between 1962 and 1971, have either college or university credentials and are professionals: doctors, teachers, professors, and entrepreneurs; the remaining are state officials or state-sector employees. By contrast, the grandparents were born between 1928 and 1948 and five grandparents have no formal education. Ten grandparents (seven grandfathers and three grandmothers) had been employed, while eight grandparents were farmers.

All informants in this study are urban residents and they consider themselves as part of the middle class by virtue of their families' economic status, with house and car ownerships. When asked about the definition and common features of the middle class, they associate them with several factors such as (1) earning power and consumption habits: a middle-class family should have an average annual disposable income of approximately CNY 1,000,000 per household, have the freedom to consume products beyond basic goods such as traveling and owning at least a house and a car; (2) professions such as cadres, entrepreneurs, or professionals (e.g. professors, doctors); and (3) people who have university degrees. These features fit Goodman's (2014: 119) description of intermediate middle class and coincide with Tsang's specific characteristics of the Chinese new middle class (2014: 10–11). My research also leads me to conclude that another feature of the middle class includes people who desire and are able to make social contributions. Almost all the grandparents as well as half of the parents and students mentioned that the middle class should bear the responsibility of enhancing society and the lives of others.

The middle class is of particular interest because this group has grown over the last decade making overseas higher education more accessible and sought after (Martin, 2017). However, the idea of what it means to be middle class in China has shifted over time and remains a heterogenous and conflicted class category with even further stratifications within this class. This is particularly true for the previous two generations, as they have experienced a China that was either republican or Maoist, and which was before the political economy of reform. Focusing on the middle classes in the most recent generation will reflect on the other cohorts through the eyes of the contemporary cohort. Further, examining the perspectives of the expanding Chinese middle classes is essential to understanding what seems to be an alleged transformation in the growing nature of the middle class. With a more heterogeneous middle class emerging (Goodman, 2014; Zhang, 2012), assessing intergenerational changes in their mobility and aspirations not only tells us more about the drive for higher education but also about the middle-class subjectivities as I will show in this article.

This author conducted multiple open-ended interviews – informed by the life and oral histories approach – with each participant on a one-to-one basis. The in-depth interviews with students were conducted in the university before paying multiple home visits and conducting face-to-face interviews with the majority of their parents and grandparents, except in a few instances where this mode of assessment proved to be unsuitable and phone interviews were instead arranged. The interviews focused on the three cohorts' experiences of education (at home and in school) and mobility in relation to their aspirations, beliefs, and values to interpret the perceptions and understandings of an overseas educational strategy as pursued by contemporary Chinese middle-class families. Beyond these broad questions, I followed a phenomenological, non-directive method. The interviews are conducted in a casual manner for my informants to recount parts of their lives. This approach prevents me from leading my respondents into situations where they are less likely to have. For example, even though there are some who display the intention of making social contributions, I avoided referring to these unless my interviewees did first. The purpose is to avoid placing my own assumptions

into respondents' minds, thereby having them give answers which they themselves do not identify with. Additionally, the question of whether informants belong to the Chinese Communist Party does not feature in my interviews. Apart from a few who proactively indicated their membership, most of the remaining interviewees did not mention if they are members. The interviews are completely voice recorded and transcribed for analysis. Having conducted multiple attempts to check and recheck narratives, I found that any bearing their membership has on their intents of making social contributions is likely to be remote. For the purposes of this article, all twenty-two student participants have been given pseudonyms, with corresponding initials, whereas their parents and grandparents are referred to as "student [pseudonym]'s parents" and "student [pseudonym]'s grandparents."

The Exemplary Values in Traditional Chinese Society

A quest for moral improvement and perpetuity lay at the core of traditional Chinese society (Bakken, 2000; Wang, 2006). In ancient China, people adopted their society's exemplary norms to have an orderly and peaceful society. The work of traditional, renowned Chinese philosophers and educators such as Lao Zi, Confucius, Mencius, Mo Zi, Zhuang Zi, Xun Zi, and Zhu Xi became schools of thought that continue to typify Chinese traditional values, guide the Chinese on their journeys through life, and serve to preserve social harmony (Bakken, 2000; Di, 2016: 41; Lai, 2017). Their collective thought forms the foundation of Chinese exemplary norms, which are passed down through the generations and find embodiment in the people influenced by these idas (Di, 2016: 41; Wang, 2006; Wu, 2016).

Traditional philosophies of teaching and learning are usually referred to by use of the term *li* (礼). *Li* means the rules of proper conduct (Nam, 2017) and is closely related to the concept of morality, a topic that was historically at the core of Chinese pedagogy and remains so in the present day (Wu, 2016). *Rites* (礼记, *liji*) is a compilation of classical Confucian texts involving a wide range of topics that develop the concept of social order and refinement through rituals and ceremonies (Di, 2016). These cornerstone texts in the Confucian corpus include *Great Learning* (大学, *daxue*) and *Teaching and Learning* (学记, *xueji*), both of which are brief essays on teaching and learning based on the ancient Confucian philosophy that emphasises personal cultivation as both the root and goal of learning (Chen, 2018). Many other classics, such as *Zhixue* (治学) by Confucius (in the *Analects*, 2008), *Quanxue* (劝学) by Xun Zi, and *Jianai* (兼爱) by Mo Zi, also offer deep insights into the concept of education as personal cultivation and a transformative resource for humankind (Ames, 2016: 24).

In *Great Learning* (大学, *daxue*), one section reads,

> Once their hearts and minds knew what is proper, their characters would be cultivated; once their characters were cultivated, their families would be set right; once their families were set right, their states would be properly ordered; and once their states were properly ordered, there would be peace in the world. (修身齐家治国平天下, *xiushen qijia zhiguo ping tianxia*) (Ames, 2016: 25)

In this piece of literature, the author tells the reader that a stable society starts from the cultivation of the individual. Once this is attained, people are then capable of pursuing higher purposes, such as serving the nation and bringing peace and prosperity to the world.

First, the Confucian form of personal cultivation involves two basic goals: the acquisition of knowledge and becoming a moral person through education (Hong, 2016: 121). Here, virtue is the crux, and together with ethics, was emphasised in a number of works by Confucius (Hong, 2016: 116). These virtues include learning and forming appropriate habits, for example those of dedication, aspiration, diligence, and respect (Di, 2016: 48). Second, Confucian philosophy regards learning and teaching as transformative processes in the realm of human experience, and it implies that education should ultimately contribute something of benefit to political and social governance (Di, 2016: 46). The importance of this idea is emphasised in a number of classical texts on Confucian philosophy; for example, in *The Analects of Confucius*, Zi Xia writes: "The student, having completed his learning, should apply himself to be an official" (学而优则仕, *xue er you ze shi*) (Analects, 2008). This central tenet of Confucianism thus resulted in the creation of the civil service examination in ancient China, and those who passed went on to serve the nation by becoming a bureaucrat. Third, teaching and learning in *Xueji* consists of a higher dimensional goal – that of improving ethics and spirituality by following The *Dao* (道) or The Way (Di, 2016: 46). The *Dao* is an ancient Chinese philosophy that attempts to explain nature and offers guidance on human interaction with nature in both the physical and spiritual realms. Therefore, *Xueji* achieves the sociocultural goal of "peacefully following nature and establishing harmony in the universe" by aligning teaching and learning with the concept of The *Dao* (Di, 2016: 46). This philosophical approach to education imbues it with a higher purpose, one that seeks to offer students opportunities to develop virtues that promote harmony and prosperity (Li, 2008). The end result is a cultivated individual, one who has become a *junzi* and who possesses Confucian virtues and conducts his life in a way that is beneficial to society (Li, 2003).

In short, traditional Chinese philosophy and its practice serve to inculcate exemplary Confucian values in Chinese people and guide their personal conduct and approach to life. As discussed, these values emphasise personal cultivation, which promotes unity and peace eventually leading to universal prosperity and stability. It is important to keep in mind, as I will show below, that these Confucian values continue to shape Chinese people's social and ethical lives and dovetail with the interviewees' understandings of *suzhi* (素质, "quality" of a person), an important concept in contemporary China.

The Exemplary Values in Contemporary China

Since 1979, when China experienced major economic reforms, the country has seen the emergence of a social economy, a private sector, and a new and more complex education system. From this point in its history, China's educational policies had to cater to a social and political need for "social harmony, continuity, and normalcy" – especially in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution – by harkening back to Confucian values, domestic

history, tradition, and culture (Di, 2016: 40). The exemplary Confucian values, passed down through the generations in the name of tradition, became part of the classroom curriculum. These values, meant to educate and create civilised people, played vital roles in a project called "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which was instrumental in charting China's path to modernization (Bakken, 2000).

With the political and economic reform in the late 1970s, China has evolved into a blending of a liberal economic system, based on the neoliberal logic of the free market, and a tightly controlled Marxist–Maoist style political system under one-party rule (Liu, 2008; Wu, 2010). A one-party state usually implies "helicopter governance" or a government that adopts a highly interventionist guiding role regarding what it determines to be the correct values and ways of life for its citizens. The exemplary values and ideal personhood in contemporary society are conflated with *suzhi* (Liu, 2008), which is orchestrated by the state for governance and loosely translated as "quality" despite its interpretation extending far beyond that (Fong, 2007). *Suzhi* came into being around the early 1980s (Kipnis, 2006) and its discourse has attracted much scholarly attention (Anagnost, 2004; Fong, 2007; Kipnis, 2006; Woronov, 2009), with a few studies even tracing its origin (see Bakken, 2000; Kipnis, 2006; Fong, 2007). According to Kipnis:

> First, *suzhi* implies qualities that are deeply internalized, these qualities are very much affected by one's upbringing [. . .] Second, contemporary usage is limited to individually embodied, human qualities [. . .] Third, *suzhi* marks the hierarchical and moral distinction between the high and the low and its improvement is a mission of national importance. (Kipnis, 2006: 297)

Suzhi is supposed to be all-rounded (全面, *quanmian)* and "fully developed" (全面发展, *quanmian fazhan*), the result of which is someone who is developed "intellectually (*zhiyu*), morally (*deyu*), physically (*tiyu*), and aesthetically (*meiyu*)" (Woronov, 2009: 572). *Suzhi* is not only limited to the technical aspects of knowledge and skills required for economic growth and modernisation, but it also pervades Chinese ideologies, politics, morals, and human behaviors – areas that promote social order (Liu, 2008) and lead to the cultivation and discipline of human beings (Bakken, 2000). China's push towards modernisation requires the improvement in quality of the entire population and being a person with *suzhi* has become the main national agenda (Jacka, 2009) that all citizens are expected to pursue (Woronov, 2009). Additionally, party leaders have attempted to advocate the two regimes of modernisation: socialist material civilisation and socialist spiritual civilisation, with each representing economic development and social stability, respectively (Bakken, 2000; Liu, 2008). As such, the ideal form of personhood "is supposed to incorporate both the qualities of the autonomous neoliberal subject in the free market and the communist collectivist values of a socialist citizen" (Liu, 2008: 196). However, many scholars have pointed out the difficulties involved in attempting to combine two sets of values that are diametrically opposed (Bakken, 2000; Liu, 2008; Woronov, 2009). Neoliberalism, in China, describes the dynamics between capitalism as well as the nation and its people. In particular, it refers to economic arrangements that deliberately intensify job competitions in capitalist markets, resulting in a society that fosters anxiety through constant self-improvement practices like the cultivation of *suzhi* to stay ahead in the labour market. As such, the ideal subject is

expected to exhibit neoliberal values, such as individualism, entrepreneurialism, the pursuit of materialism, and competitiveness (Ganti, 2014; Kasser et al., 2007). By contrast, the socialist regime requires the denial of individuality by embracing collectivist values such as self-devotion to the Party and the nation. Along the way, *suzhi* gradually became a socially constructed term, with individuals conveniently defining it according to their strength (Fong, 2007: 103). Fong (2007: 92) further pointed out that *suzhi* "could be seen as a designation for what Pierre Bourdieu called 'cultural capital.'" Having this quality is viewed as a form of capital, or benchmark, that quantifies social and economic success (see Kipnis, 2006). Thus, regardless of whether it is defined by the state or by citizens, *suzhi* is generally composed of desirable values. In the exemplary Chinese society, people cultivate and discipline themselves as responsible citizens without the need for government intervention (Bakken, 2000).

This article mainly focuses on Chinese middle-class families' efforts in cultivating their children's *suzhi*, before showing how their motivations in fulfilling their respective values differ from those that are a response to neoliberal governmentality and global capitalism in existing literature (see Anagnost, 2004; Sigley, 2006; Sun, 2009; Tomba, 2009). Instead, it is about the development of an ideal personhood and the fulfilment of Confucian values through overseas education. The Chinese middle-class families presented in this article also seem to have widely prioritised the socialist ideal of personhood over neoliberal values, thus departing from other studies which show the greater appeal of capitalist values among younger Chinese people today (see Liu, 2008). This research also finds that some Chinese middle-class families' understandings of ideal personhood is embedded in Confucian values, which has become the "paramount value" (Dumont, 1977, 1980) for shaping their understandings of *suzhi* and their approach to achieving distinction. Although Kipnis (2006: 307) highlighted that "Confucian traditions of cultivation inform contemporary *suzhi* discourse," he only briefly mentioned that the "Confucian modes of cultivation included physical, musical, ritual, intellectual and moral training" without further elaboration. The following sections thus explore how Chinese middle-class families perceive and understand exemplary Confucian values in contemporary Chinese society and how they strive to cultivate their children by educating them overseas.

Fulfilling the Exemplary Ideal Personhood

Personal Cultivation

Traditional philosophical approaches to education and traditional practices of personal cultivation (修身, *xiushen*) have a striking appeal to the Chinese families in this study. Regardless of family background and personal biography, all the parents and grandparents asserted that it is important for their children to become a "complete person" (成人, *chengren*) and that the primary purpose of education is to cultivate the student's character and morals. *Chengren* is understood as becoming a "complete person" and it characterizes all aspects of moral cultivation. Confucius defined this term as someone who is well developed intellectually and morally – people who have

wisdom, courage, control over their desires, and who "on seeing a chance to profit, first think of the appropriate conduct; on seeing danger, are ready to give their lives" (Analects, 2008). Typically, the parents and grandparents I interviewed wanted their children and grandchildren to become complete persons before pursuing other peaks of excellence (成功, *chenggong*). For example, Natalie's mother is one interviewee who holds this view:

> What matters is that the child becomes a 'complete person' (成人, *chengren*). Whether or not he or she becomes successful is another issue altogether. However, if the child is not a 'complete person' then having success bears no meaning as it is unlikely to benefit society. (Anonymous 1, 2017)

Sharing these sentiments, Kathy's mother said,

> The most important education is to cultivate a person with moral characteristics. It is only when the *suzhi* of people are enhanced that our country's future will be promising. This is neither referring to any skillsets nor educating people to become specialists in any field. This is about a commitment to the spiritual maturation of an individual which would be beneficial to society. (Anonymous 2, 2016)

The emphasis on the personal cultivation of Confucian values also featured strongly in many of the students' narratives. In similar terms to several other interviewees who were cultivated with traditional Confucian values, Vanessa explained it as follows:

> I feel very fortunate to be Chinese because China has a profound cultural heritage. This has provided me with a wide spectrum of knowledge and culture, as Confucian values are the essence of our culture; and because of this, China is different from other countries. Such values include benevolence (仁, *ren*), righteousness (义, *yi*), propriety (礼, *li*), knowledge (智, *zhi*), trust (信, *xin*), filial piety (孝, *xiao*), and moderation (中庸, *zhongyong*); and it is these Confucian values that unify the Chinese people and make us a better person. (Anonymous 3, 2016)

The interviewed parents and grandparents further elaborated on the importance of Confucian values in the development of moral character. Personal qualities such as fortitude, gratitude, optimism, responsibility, humility, helpfulness, and benevolence were frequently mentioned, as these traditional values offer the Chinese guidance on how to approach life. Almost everyone interviewed brought up the influence they had received from family members and how these familial role models shaped their thinking and behaviour. The following examples illustrate how family members emphasise the importance of moral education and how they became exemplary models within their families by cultivating and embodying traditional values. Ethan's family is a case in point. It began with his grandmother inculcating high moral standards in her children and grandchildren:

> Since he [Ethan] was a kid I have cultivated in my grandson the need to be warm-hearted. Now that he is studying medicine, I believe that he will become a good doctor, not only because of his techniques and skills – important though they are – but also because of his

> warm-heartedness. That is what makes the difference. Further, my family prioritized and taught me to live a life of righteousness, honesty, benevolence, and compassion – hallmarks of Confucian values. (Anonymous 4, 2017)

Ethan's father added:

> My family trained me to be tolerant, open-minded, and to always see the best in people. For example, when someone had been unpleasant to my father, he would often comment that 'perhaps that person has difficulties in life and did not mean to be rude' and that we needed to show 'understanding'. (Anonymous 5, 2016)

This exemplary model is affirmed by Natalie, who observed that women in her family are diligent and mentally robust; no matter how tough life becomes, they never complain but continue to support the family. As a result, her resolve to conquer every difficulty in life deepened. Thomas, too, acknowledged the importance of traditional cultural values such as self-respect, respect for others, and discipline: "These days many people no longer possess Confucian values but value only money instead. However, I really hope to set the right example and pass on those values to the next generation through my actions," he said. The characteristics or qualities emphasised in their interviews by Ethan's and Natalie's families as well as Thomas closely align with Confucius's writings on benevolence (仁, *ren*), perseverance (坚持, *jianchi*), and respect (尊敬, *zunjing*) and is in accordance to traditional practices and exemplary norms. In Chinese society, those traditional values are transmitted, reproduced, and emphasised through exemplary norms and role models. Thus, the middle-class families in this study are keenly aware of the Confucian underpinnings in their pursuit of moral cultivation.

Many of the students, parents, and grandparents interviewed were emphatic that an overseas education provides better cultivation. The parents I interviewed frequently mentioned the high degree of *suzhi* in certain Western values that closely resemble Confucian ones like trustworthiness and politeness. They also desire their offspring to acquire universal values that happen to be in line with other Confucian virtues that promote harmony and prosperity together with the Chinese government's socialist-collectivist ethos. Although there is no equivalent concept of *suzhi* in Western societies, this article nevertheless reveals that some of the values Chinese middle-class parents want for their children are regarded by them as being of "high quality" (高素质, *gao suzhi*). Thus, when asked about the merits of overseas education, they instinctively articulated their desire for [better] *suzhi* cultivation – a clear reference to the inculcation of moral values.

Confucian Values

The Chinese families in this study regard Western people as having high *suzhi*, and they felt that the respective Western nations – most parents specified the United States and United Kingdom – can provide a better environment for the cultivation of their children's morals. When asked what kind of *suzhi* they identified with, they mentioned, as examples, honesty, trustworthiness, and politeness, which all accord with the traditional

Confucian exemplary value of benevolence (*ren*). In addition, many parents expressed their belief that, as industrial and urban development began much earlier in Western nations than in China, Western citizens have benefited for many generations from opportunities to become more courteous and civilised than the majority of Chinese people. Many parents recounted personal or friends' experiences of travelling abroad and how they caught glimpses of traditional Chinese values exhibited by the foreigners who subscribe to Western values. For example, Grace's mother told me,

> Westerners are more trusting, disciplined and polite. I remember when I was a visiting scholar in America and was buying some food in the supermarket; my daughter was very hungry and wanted to eat right away. Hence, I asked the salesperson if this was acceptable. The salesperson gave me a receipt and told my daughter that it was alright to do so provided we paid for all the items at the till. This is not allowed in China, as it is a question of trust. Therefore, I want to send my daughter abroad as I want her to be exposed to a beautiful culture in which people trust and are courteous with each other. (Anonymous 7, 2017)

Ethan's father offered this recollection:

> When I visited England, the people left a big impression on me. When I needed help, be it in the bank or police station, the staff were ever so patient and willing to spend a long time explaining to me. Their attitude made me comfortable in speaking up and asking for assistance. By contrast, I sometimes felt I had to be careful when speaking to people in the service industry [in China] – just in case they became impatient and felt offended. For instance, I am afraid they might chide me if I ask very simple questions. (Anonymous 5, 2016)

Grace's mother's emphasis on trust (诚信, *chengxin*) and Ethan's father's emphasis on politeness (礼貌, *limao*) and respect (尊重, *zunzhong*) are typical of those who value Confucian standards of behaviour.

Further, most parents and grandparents made the point that Chinese society has changed greatly in recent decades. While acknowledging that the living standard has improved over the years, they feel as if moral and ethical standards in China have declined. Virtues such as politeness, trust, and honesty, which most Chinese families revere, have, in my interviewees' opinion, gradually atrophied. The following anecdotes are illustrative of the reasons why the parents and grandparents in my study are now convinced that China is unable to provide a sufficiently fertile ground for the moral cultivation of their families' younger members. Caroline's father commented: "I remembered the experience of taking a bus in Guangzhou; before I could board properly, people started shoving me in." Diana's grandfather said,

> Though our country has become stronger, the streets have become safer, and people's living standards are greatly enhanced, a proportion of society has become selfish and amoral. Say, in agriculture, some people even sell dead seeds to deceive farmers in the village; these crooks just wanted to make money. (Anonymous 9, 2017)

This type of experience has led to the fostering of a belief that Western countries have a superior social ethos and can therefore better cultivate and shape the moral qualities of the next generation.

Universal Values

Not only do Chinese middle-class families desire traditional Confucian values, but they are also poised to embody universal values. Chinese middle-class families believe that *suzhi* in contemporary society has become increasingly diversified and hybridised, and it is necessary that present cultivations of *suzhi* include an assimilation and absorption of universal values. In this research, the most sought-after universal values by parents for their children are freedom, independence, equality, humanitarian care (in this study, informants mean a person should have a general attitude of being caring to others), and beneficence. For instance, Ethan's father said:

> I think the most important values are freedom and independence. This is not only about striving for freedom for myself, but also for others. I think education instils in a person the need to pursue freedom. It is a question of gaining freedom and being independent. Thus, it is crucial that a person has such subjectivity. However, the awareness to pursue freedom is very rare in Chinese education now because Chinese culture lacks such focus. In contrast, the richness of the humanities as well as Renaissance influences in Western culture introduced subjectivities and promoted diversity. (Anonymous 5, 2016)

Kathy's father commented:

> Western educational philosophy highlights philanthropy and humanistic care. Subjects such as literature, history and philosophy are highly valued in Western societies compared to Chinese schools. As such, the educational systems are obviously different: Chinese education is more utilitarian, exam-oriented, and only focuses on the practicability of educational output, such as whether the subject has any economic value. So, I am sending my child abroad and hoping that she learns to care about others, as such values cannot be learned in Chinese schools. (Anonymous 10, 2017)

Caroline's father agreed:

> Western educational philosophy highlights justice, equality, philanthropy, and beneficence. Further, relationships between people are relatively simple in western countries. Under the influence of such a culture, my child will develop an awareness to care about others, embrace new things, observe social inequities, and learn to make sound moral judgements. It is unlikely that my child can learn this in China, as compassion is often seen here as a sign of weakness to be preyed upon. For example, if a person falls on the streets in China, people would see this and cross the street, in case they end up being accused by the 'victim' as the 'perpetrator,' as can happen if you decide to be a 'Good Samaritan'. This is a common trick to swindle the uninitiated. (Anonymous 8, 2017)

World Views

Influenced by the impact of global markets and globalisation, the parents in this research said that young people these days need a sophisticated understanding of the world and can gain a better understanding of the modern world through an overseas education. They wanted their offspring to have different experiences and broadened horizons. Many researchers in the field of education have published scholarship that discusses the themes of "seeking different experiences" and "broadening horizons" (see Findlay et al., 2011; King et al., 2011; Rizvi, 2005). In this research study, parents spoke of wanting their children to cultivate a wide-ranging worldview through a thirst for knowledge and to embrace different cultures and societies. These milestones are regarded by them as central to their children's cultivation and spiritual development in their quest to embody *suzhi*. For instance, Isabel's father expressed his wish that,

> With the economic reforms and the improvement in living standards, most people in China can make a living and eat well. As a result, people will take up additional pursuits. Hence, I feel that this is a global era for young people. Further, it is important that they see the world from a global perspective rather than limiting themselves to that of China alone. (Anonymous 11, 2017)

Samuel's father added,

> If a person is confined to his own culture and society entirely, then this is a loss and a pity. The world is so big; we should go out into the world and learn from other cultures. If we study abroad, we will encounter opportunities to experience different cultures, perceive different political systems, social patterns, and know what other people's socio-cultural, material, and spiritual lives are like. These are all worth exploring with an open mind. Understanding different cultures and societies not only enriches one's life, but also refines one's personal values, outlook on life, and worldview. This in turn inspires us to think about the meaning of life and to pursue happiness. (Anonymous 11, 2017)

Grace's mother commented how one can experience a blending of Chinese and Western cultures and appreciate their similarities and differences:

> The best way to understand cultural conflicts is to personally live in and experience the local cultures. Then, regardless of where you live in the future, you will be able to accurately portray and compare them when needed. (Anonymous 7, 2017)

While the ideal *suzhi* in contemporary society incorporates both the communist–collectivist values of the socialist citizen, and those of the autonomous neoliberal subject negotiating globalised free markets (Liu, 2008: 196), Chinese middle-class families' desires to see their children enriched through their attainment of the ideal *suzhi* instead resonates with Confucian philosophy and the communist–collectivist values. These values are reflected in the parents' emphasis on the need for their offspring to cultivate exemplary traditional Confucian values like honesty, trustworthiness, and politeness together with universal values including, humanitarian care, beneficence, freedom, and equality. Further, the cultivation of a global worldview resonates with what Martin

described as "a quasi-universal value" in today's norm (Martin, 2017: 715). The values that these families seek to imbibe are the result of moral cultivation and the transmission of traditional values through family role models. It is important to emphasise that prior to *suzhi* discourse, moral cultivation has always been an essential part of child rearing, with Confucian values shaping Chinese people's social and ethical lives. With the emergence of *suzhi* discourse, Chinese families naturally equate the cultivation of *suzhi* to the instilling of exemplary values during my interviews. Further, when discussing their own understandings of *suzhi*, Confucian values are constantly mentioned. The pursuit of *suzhi-deyu* (moral cultivation) becomes the main priority among these middle-class families' understandings of *suzhi.* While this may portray the families [in this study] as having uncritical understandings of *suzhi*, I would instead argue that it is primarily due to them identifying more with and forging closer alignments with Confucian than neoliberal values by drawing on Dumont's notion of the hierarchy of values (1977, 1980). According to the above narratives, being "a complete person" (*chengren*) takes pre-eminence over personal success (*chenggong*) as Confucian values are ranked higher than neoliberal values. Thus, Confucian values become the paramount value which shape these families' motivations for pursuing overseas education. In addition to serving society as responsible citizens who represent what is perceived by them as the ideal *suzhi*, some Chinese middle-class families also harbour a desire for their offspring to achieve the ideal personhood of *junzi* and fulfil the aforementioned Confucian virtues, as I will further discuss.

Making Contributions

Serving the Nation

When discussing their ambitions for younger members in their families, parents and grandparents highlighted a mix of social mobility and making contributions to society. While the aims are not necessarily mutually exclusive, I am nevertheless choosing to focus on the views shared by family members who emphasised the importance of the second aspiration to them in this article. The families' preoccupation with making social contributions (贡献, *gongxian*) conveys the traditional Chinese philosophical view that the higher purpose of teaching and learning is to enable the student to assist in harmonious social and political governance. Further, the parents' views reflect the CCP's ideology, which expects citizens to help China to fulfil its socialist modernisation, particularly "socialist spiritual civilisation."

As grandparents and parents share about their life experiences, they recount instances of Confucian upbringing, changes, difficulties, and turning points, including their aspirations for the future in their youth. Particularly, grandparents recall how they went through much pain and suffering during foreign invasions and the Cultural Revolution which had impeded China's progress. These harrowing memories had profound influences on them especially when they knew how they lacked the capabilities to change their fate as well as their nation's. Hence, the interviewees (including students) are

emphatic in their emphasis on Confucian values and the importance of giving back to strengthen one's nation.

Natalie's grandmother after sharing how she had to hide herself during the Sino-Japanese War and how the Cultural Revolution had stymied China's development for a decade made the following vehement point:

> Our generation suffered so much and had our country not been lifted from poverty, we would never be having a comfortable life now. It is only when our country is strong and prosperous that people can have a good life. Hence, I believe that everyone should be supporting the country and education is the key to doing so. With knowledge, one can then accelerate China's modernization and bring about economic growth. (Anonymous 13, 2017)

This sentiment is also strong among the parents' generation. Diana's mother was emotional:

> I think China has become stronger and gradually attained a higher status on the world stage over the past ten years. Now, Chinese people who are studying or traveling abroad are accorded respect. Thus, it is important that talents in this country should be employed to help the country in all areas. (Anonymous 14, 2017)

The need to serve one's own nation also featured strongly in many of the students' narratives. For example, when asked what pursuit is most important to her, Natalie shared her plan to return and lamented about China's brain drain:

> I think this [brain drain] is a very serious matter in China and I'm saddened that some people believe our country cannot provide a prosperous environment to pursue their dreams and decide to stay abroad as a result. But I feel that it is precisely because China is not advanced enough that we have an obligation to return and make it better. (Anonymous 15, 2016)

This goal, of serving one's nation, became part of the motivations for studying abroad and featured strongly in many interviewees' narratives. Some parents felt that young people should be equipped with a global mindset and the latest knowledge, so that they can best contribute to the country. For example, Isabel's father believes that since the Cultural Revolution is a well-known episode throughout the world, foreigners continue to assume that Chinese people are oppressed by a Maoist-era styled communist regime – a misconception. What motivated him to send his daughter overseas was the hope that she will eventually make her contribution to the betterment of Chinese society by facilitating better communication between China and other countries, thereby reducing the risk of future global conflicts, which might arise from avoidable cultural misunderstandings. As Isabel's father shared, "I hope that no matter where my child is in the future, be it in China or overseas, as a Chinese, she should use her expertise and make contributions to China."

In another example, Caroline's father stated that:

> People are increasingly paying attention to education, and hence the intellectual *suzhi* of the entire population is increasing. Throughout the development of Chinese society, there has been a pressing need for graduates with advanced skills in, for example, the areas of

> computing, engineering, digital marketing, and risk management. Western countries have more of such expertise and we should therefore learn from them, so we can make better contributions [to our country]. (Anonymous 8, 2017)

Samuel's father revealed,

> If you just stay in China, you are neither going to be equipped with a global mindset nor have the knowledge of how different political and cultural systems operate in other countries. Therefore, how will you have the ability to judge the relative merits of your own country's political and cultural system? In consequence, you will also be unable to generate constructive ideas about how your country can improve. (Anonymous 12, 2017)

The drive to gain knowledge and serve the nation is not merely confined to parents – it is also desired by the students in my study. They feel that studying abroad inspires them to search for their callings in life. Oscar is one such student:

> Studying abroad gave me the chance to communicate with people from less developed countries, in the Middle East and Africa. I realized that once China stops developing, it will end up becoming a Third World country, facing external threats and repeating history. Therefore, no matter how much I want to pursue social status and wealth, I, too, would want to fulfil higher callings and make life more meaningful. This entails bringing back to China the philosophy and expertise I have acquired in the UK, so that China can change for the better – especially in its academic institutions. (Anonymous 16, 2016)

Serving the World

Additionally, there is also a consensus among some students' narratives about the importance of contributing to society. Twelve students and six parents told me of their desire to make a positive impact in the wider world beyond Chinese society (平天下, *ping tianxia*). Meanwhile, Ethan and Vanessa shared their deep desires to use their expertise to help others. Ethan told me that one of the most influential people in his life was a professor who had taught him how to relate to patients' feelings and to show compassion for them. When I asked Ethan what he wished to accomplish after graduation, he replied,

> I want to become someone who is useful to society, say, by being willing and able to help people; to me, that is a pleasure. Also, with education, people learn, and as a result, they widen their horizons, perceive the world differently and improve their *suzhi*. It's like – when people attain a higher level of wisdom, they should then shoulder more responsibilities, to try and make the world a better place. This allows them to make a greater contribution and to create a 'virtuous cycle,' in which good works by one individual beget further good works, by others. (Anonymous 17, 2016)

Here, Ethan makes a clear connection between the cultivation of the self-associated with his wish to attain "a higher level of wisdom" – and serving the wider society, as he believes the educated "should shoulder more responsibilities" and "make the world a better place." His statements thus echo the central concept of traditional Chinese philosophies of teaching and learning – namely, that education's ultimate purposes are for the

better governance of society and to enable a student to exercise just and responsible behaviour in that society.

Similarly, Vanessa elaborated that education is not just a means to an end, but a source of personal empowerment that also serves the greater good. She spoke about how her dream conflicts with her relatives' expectations, how studying overseas had changed her, and how she could now unleash her newfound aspiration to help others by teaching children in rural areas after graduation:

> Personally, I believe that people should follow their hearts and pursue what they want even though there may be conflicts of interests with others on some occasions. For example, my relatives have always expected me to seek a well-paying job in the city. Yet, I have always wanted to help people in rural areas of China which remains an unfulfilled wish. Studying overseas has inspired me, and I really want to devote myself to helping others especially since I have received a quality education in life. I may not make a huge difference, but I will be very happy as long as I can leverage on my expertise and bring about positive changes in rural communities. However, the free-spirited notion of doing whatever I want can be quite selfish as I still have familial responsibilities. Hence, I have been vacillating between Confucian and neoliberal values before finally deciding to pursue my dreams having already secured my parents' blessings. (Anonymous 3, 2016)

Both Ethan's and Vanessa's wishes resonate with those of other respondents who perceive their overseas education as having enhanced their *suzhi*, inspired them to think philosophically, care about others, pursue a meaningful life, and make a difference in the world. This article further contends that, although seemingly highly incongruous, neoliberal values and Confucian values can coexist effectively. Through the lens of Dumont's hierarchy of values (1977, 1980), I argue that neoliberal and Confucian values are not simplistic binary. The Confucian values for some Chinese in this study may take on a higher-ranked level, while neoliberal values are relegated. For example, Oscar and Vanessa (as discussed above) want to pursue both material and spiritual aims; however, they prioritised the latter, that is, making social contributions. As such, their desire to pursue a spiritual life outranks their desire for material pursuits and upholds their Confucian values. Hence, these families, whose aim is to produce an ethical subject and establish a meaningful life that is worth living, are essentially driven by Confucian values.

Many scholars addressed the change in values among young people and how they have become embodiments of "national nihilism and a magnified, empty patriotism" (Wang, 2006: 236), "become apolitical and devoid of civil obligations" (Yan, 2013: 283), how their "public lives are placed in service to their private ambitions" (Rosen, 2009: 368), and who only focus on "capitalist values," with an "absence of reference to the socialist-communist values" (Liu, 2008: 207). However, this study shows otherwise: The Chinese families interviewed emphasised the importance of contributing back to one's country and to the wider world. It is evident from the remarks quoted above that an overseas education, as these parents and young people understand it, enables the cultivation of skills that facilitate one's ability to help with the betterment of society and humanity, and which thereby lead to one's spiritual development. For these Chinese families, serving the nation (治国, zhiguo) to them is thus both an expression of

love for one's family, country, and a means of fulfilling political purposes; whereas serving the wider world is an illustration of one's wishes to advance global community. Their notion of serving one's nation and humanity more widely expresses the traditional emphasis on pursuing education for a higher purpose, in which the concept of working for the purpose of social harmony remains crucial. It also dovetails with the CCP's socialist-collectivist ethos and resembles the party's trope of "two civilisations" – socialist-material and socialist-spiritual, in which the latter presupposes the former (Bakken, 2000; Liu, 2008).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the motivations of Chinese middle-class families who pursue overseas education are revealing of the exemplary Confucian values that they desire to embody and of the kind of ideal personhood they want to achieve. These families believe that two types of values are promoted by the value systems of developed Western societies: desirable universal values such as freedom, equality, and a globalised world view and values that closely resemble Confucian ones, such as politeness, honesty, and trust. In this respect, the parents and grandparents interviewed believe Western countries can provide a better environment for cultivating both types of values among their younger family members. Further, young people interviewed in this study seem to have successfully integrated these two types of values (universal and traditional Confucian) and to have seamlessly internalised the Confucian concept of *junzi*, with a strong belief in the importance of making a positive difference in the world at a national and wider level. The Confucian value system draws equally on traditional Chinese philosophies of teaching and learning and from the CCP's socialist-collectivist ethos. Its importance to the interviewees in this study indicates that personal cultivation and social contributions have made Chinese middle-class families exemplary and given them the status of distinction.

The central concern of this article questions how ethical subjects emerge and the role which the Chinese state, family, and education have in governing and cultivating the virtuous person and a meaningful life. Seen through the lens of Dumont's work (1977, 1980), the cultivation of an ethical subject through overseas education is driven by Confucian values and the families' pursuit of making social contributions is the fulfilment of their paramount value. Confucian value, as an overall paramount value, structures life for the Chinese and permeates middle-class subjectivity to produce an ethical subject. Thus, Chinese middle-class families are conscious about the importance of Confucian values – widely perceived as traditional culture – in the cultivation of their children. Furthermore, *suzhi* discourse, orchestrated by the state and used as a tool for governance, reinscribes Confucian values despite the ideal *suzhi* embodying both neoliberal and socialist values. In aiming to produce an ethical subject and establishing a good life that is worth living, Chinese middle-class families' cultivation of their offspring is likely to be guided more by Confucian values than by the logic of neoliberalism. It is why families in this study are showing an awareness of and prioritising Confucian values in order for their children to become an exemplary (or ideal) person. This echoes President Xi Jinping's vision of "The Chinese Dream" which seeks to capitalise on the motivations of young

Chinese people in their pursuit of a life of excellence, indirectly resulting in the rejuvenation of the country (Liu, 2019). This also dovetails with Tomba's view (2014: 143) of a middle class that is "the most desirable type of subject for an authoritarian state: politically docile, but willing to fulfill an ethical and moral responsibility in the name of social stability, [and] traditional virtues [. . .]." This study concludes that in the future, without any government intervention, the Chinese middle-class is likely to invest ever greater resources in seeking to cultivate the ideal personhood of *junzi* – someone who embodies the exemplary norms and traditional values and who conducts his or her life in ways that are beneficial to society. In summary, this study argues that some Chinese middle-class families are experiencing a transition, from egoism (material pursuits) to altruism (spiritual pursuits), and in due course, fulfilling Confucian values and making social contributions is highly likely to become part of middle-class subjectivities.

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Anonymous 8 (2017) Pseudonym Caroline's father, interview, businessman, China, 20 February.

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